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SILENT SPREAD

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Since no new country has declared itself to be a nuclear power for more than 20 years and since none is known to have detonated a first nuclear test for over a decade, it is not unreasonable to hope that the spread of nuclear weapons can yet be curbed. Indeed, if a test is taken as the standard, then proliferation has actually been tapering off. The first decade of the nuclear age, 1945-1955, saw three new entrants to the club, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain; the second saw two, France and the People's Republic of China (PRC); and the third only one, India, in 1974. Since then, no additional countries are known to have conducted nuclear tests.

This is cause for optimism, since a country that demonstrates its nuclear capability by testing intensifies the pressures on its neighbors to follow suit and further legitimates the pursuit of nuclear arms worldwide. Testing is also an essential steppingstone to H-bomb and missile-warhead development. Nonetheless, testing is but one measure of proliferation. Most specialists believe that reliable nuclear weapons can be developed without testing; indeed, the type of bomb dropped on Hiroshima had never been tested.

When measured in terms of countries that have the capability to produce nuclear weapons and that might be prepared to do so in a major conflict or in response to other regional pressures, the pace of proliferation has been considerably quicker than suggested above, and the trend less reassuring. Israel probably achieved this status between 1968 and 1973; India, in 1974; South Africa, by 1977; Pakistan is likely to join their ranks in the next year or so; and Argentina and Brazil may gain similar status by the early 1990s. Iraq was on this

road, too, until Israel destroyed the Osiraq reactor near Baghdad in 1981.

Seen in this light, proliferation has been increasing at a steady rate and will continue to do so through the end of the century. Still more disturbing, the United States, its principal industrialized partners, and the Soviet Union have shown by their actions that they will tolerate such veiled nuclearization. Provided the emerging nuclear powers keep their nuclear capabilities ambiguous, the advanced industrial countries have embraced a set of de facto restraints on their responses to such activities. In effect, rules of engagement have emerged in the nonproliferation battle. Unless these rules are substantially strengthened, they will not stop the bomb from spreading.

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Danger at Dimona

Israel, which is not known to have tested a nuclear weapon and which has never acknowledged possessing any, is the prototype of ambiguous proliferation. Since 1962 Israel's announced policy has been that it will not be the first to "introduce" nuclear weapons into the Middle East. Nonetheless, most observers believe that Israel has possessed nuclear arms since the late 1960s or early 1970s.

During the early 1960s the United States aggressively intervened to prevent Israel from developing such weapons, insisting that it restrict the use of the Dimona research reactor, which it had obtained secretly from France under a 1957 agreement, and submit the facility to annual U.S. inspection. By 1969, however, Washington had become considerably more tolerant.

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